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ABSTRACT

Two studies were undertaken to determine first whether language characteristics attributed to females are more socially desirable than those attributed to males and second whether a double standard exists such that language traits seen as socially desirable for adults in general are viewed as negative when assigned to either females or males. For the first study, 94 college students were asked to rate qualities of speech that are stereotypic of male or female speech as being more or less socially desirable. It was found that traits more often assigned to women's language are rated more socially desirable than those associated with men's language. In the second study, 96 different college students were assigned to one of three treatment groups. The first group was asked to evaluate 36 stereotypic characteristics as if they were the behavior of a mature, competent adult woman. For the second group, "man" was substituted for "woman" in the directions; for the third group, "person" was used. The results showed that characteristics of competent females were more like those of competent adults than were those for competent males. (TJ)

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LANGUAGE AND GENDER: STEREOTYPES REVISITED

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LANGUAGE AND GENDER
STEREOTYPES REVISITED*

Sex role stereotypes about the appropriate behavior for females and males have been the focus of numerous research studies. It is a frequent finding that personality traits attributed to females are evaluated differently and less favorably than those of males (e.g., McKee and Sherriffs, 1957; Sherriffs and McKee, 1957; Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz and Vogel, 1970). Although actual differences between females and males in personality characteristics have been seldom documented, stereotypes continue to influence expectations and interpretations of their behavior (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1975).

An important vehicle for the transmission of sex role behavior is language, both in its depiction of females and males and its use by females and males. How individuals convey their personality to others is often judged by their language used and style of expression. The relative power or status of an individual is also conveyed through language. In particular, the relative subordinate status of women in society in comparison to the more dominant status of men may be expressed in assymetrical, or unbalanced language interactions (Eakins & Eakins, 1978).

Efforts to document actual sex differences in language characteristics have been thwarted by the difficulty in capturing real life situations for laboratory analysis and the variety of situational factors that can influence language behavior (i.e., type of conversation, setting, age, race, status, background, and number as well as sex of participants).

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Nonetheless, sufficient documentation exists to hypothesize that two distinct language patterns exist, one for women and one for men (Lakoff, 1973; Kramer, 1974a, 1974b; Thorne and Henley, 1975). Traits contributing to a female style of speech include use of correct speech forms (Labov, 1972); dynamic intonations observable by a wide range of pitch, variations in loudness and frequent change of rate (McConnell-Ginet, 1978); polite and cheerful intonations (Brend, 1972); higher pitch levels than expected by female physiological factors (Sachs, 1973); use of expressive intensifiers such as "so," "such," "adorable," and "lovely" (Lakoff, 1975; Baumann, 1976; McMillan, Clifton, McGrath and Cooley, 1977); and use of questions to express opinions (Lakoff, 1975; Dubois and Couch, 1976; McMillan, et al., 1977).

In contrast, male speech has been characterized by more frequent use of joking (Coser, 1960); hostile verbs (Gilley and Summers, 1970); interruptions in conversations with females (Zimmerman and West, 1975); a greater amount of talking (Swacker, 1975); and lower pitch levels than expected by male physiological factors (Sachs, 1973).

Although relatively few differences in language characteristics have been isolated by researchers, as indicated above, studies show that people in the U.S. culture perceive many differences in language between the sexes (Kramer, 1975, 1977; Siegler, 1973). Kramer found 36 speech characteristics that high school and college aged students attributed to one sex significantly more often than to the other (see Table 1). For example, female speech was depicted as more likely than male speech to be friendly, gentle, enthusiastic, smooth, jibberish, and talk about trivial topics. Male speech was viewed more likely to be forceful, loud, dominating, and straight to the point than female speech. She suggested that female speech in contrast to that of males was perceived as "kind and correct, but unimportant" and ineffective (1977).

Based on the differences in actual language behaviors and perceived language behaviors, theorists such as Lakoff (1975) have concluded that the female speech style is inferior to that of males and that women need to develop a more "neutral", (i.e., male) speech style to become more competent communicators. However, an examination of the speech characteristics attributed to women reveal many positive qualities, while many of the characteristics of male speech appear to have socially undesirable or ineffective characteristics. When Kramer (1978) compared attributes for an ideal speaker to those for a typical male and a typical female, she found that more male characteristics deviated from the ideal than did female characteristics.

No research to date has attempted to measure the social desirability or perceived effectiveness of the differing communication characteristics attributed to females and males or to compare communication traits ascribed to competent male, female, and adult (sex unspecified) speakers. Further investigation is needed to determine: (1) whether or not language characteristics attributed to females are more socially desirable than those attributed to males, and (2) whether or not a double standard exists such that language traits seen as socially desirable for adults in general are viewed as negative when assigned to either females or males.

In a now classic study on sex role stereotypes, Broverman, et al. (1970) found that such a double standard existed for personality characteristics assigned to healthy, competent men versus women. When mental health clinicians were asked to describe a healthy adult male, the personality attributes correlated substantially with those used to describe a healthy adult. When asked to describe a healthy adult female, there was considerable deviation in the traits assigned from those of a healthy adult, sex unspecified. While in the Broverman study, stereotypic negative qualities of females were assigned to the healthy adult woman, it may be possible that the reverse would occur in

the assigning of language characteristics. That is, if characteristics of stereotypical female speech behavior were viewed as more appropriate for competent communication than characteristics of stereotypical male speech behavior, then one would expect more parallels between a competent adult speaker, sex unspecified, and a competent woman speaker than between a competent adult and a competent male speaker.

The study reported here tests these hypotheses in two parts. First, ratings of the social desirabilities of the 36 speech characteristics established by Kramer (1975, 1977), which were stereotypically assigned more often to one sex or the other, were obtained to compare the overall desirability of female-linked and male-linked traits, examine differences among individual traits, and determine any differences by sex of subject. Second, ratings of the 36 characteristics were obtained to compare perceptions for a competent communicator who was either an adult female, adult male, or adult, sex unspecified.

METHOD

Instrument

The author developed a Language Stereotype Questionnaire based on a study by Kramer (1975, 1977), who pinpointed 20 language and speech characteristics linked with typical female speakers significantly more often than male speakers and 16 characteristics linked with typical male speakers significantly more often than female speakers (see Table 1). These traits were part of a pool of 55 characteristics which high school and college aged subjects perceived as typical of adult language and speech behavior.

TABLE 1

CHARACTERISTICS DIFFERENTIATING FEMALE
AND MALE SPEAKERS FOR BOTH WOMEN AND MEN
(Kramer, 1975)

Female Stereotypic Language Characteristics	Male Stereotypic Language Characteristics
Enunciate clearly	Demanding voice
High pitch	Deep voice
Use hands and face to express ideas	Boastful speech
Gossip	Use swear words
Concern for listener	Dominating speech
Gentle speech	Loud speech
Fast speech	Show anger rather than concealing
Talk about trivial topics	Straight to the point
Wide range in rate and pitch	Militant speech
Friendly speech	Use slang
Talk a lot	Authoritarian speech
Emotional speech	Forceful speech
Use many details	Lounge, lean back while talking
Smooth speech	Aggressive speech
Open, self-revealing speech	Blunt speech
Enthusiastic speech	Sense of humor in speech
Smile a lot when talking	
Good grammar	
Polite speech	
Jibberish	

In the Language Stereotype Questionnaire, each of the 36 characteristics was converted to a 60-point bipolar scale as shown in the examples below:

Very Dominating Speech Not at all Dominating Speech

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7

Not at all Friendly Speech Very Friendly Speech

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7

Therefore, each trait has a pole that is stereotypically linked with female language characteristics (e.g., not at all dominating speech, very friendly speech) and a pole stereotypically linked with male language characteristics (e.g., very dominating speech, not at all friendly speech).

In both experiments, participants were asked to complete the questionnaire, in which the characteristics were randomly ordered, by putting a slash appropriately on the dots of the scale but not on the numbers in order to eliminate the neutral response of 4.

Scoring

Scores for each trait could range from 10 to 70 according to placement of the slash on the scale. Since the items were randomly ordered to create a mixture of female-associated and male-associated traits at each pole, scores were then recoded to reflect all female associated traits in the 41-70 range and all male-associated traits in the 10-39 range. A combination score of the mean of all traits, the language score, was used in many of the analyses. The larger the language score, the greater the positiveness of the female-linked items (41-70). The smaller the score, the greater the positiveness of the male-linked items (10-39).

Experiment 1 - Social Desirability

Ninety-four college students (44 females, 50 males) from four undergraduate classes (math, economics and education) at Florida State University agreed to participate in the study. They were mostly white and ranged from age 18 to age 40 with a mean age of 22.8 years. Participants were asked to evaluate 36 language and speech characteristics to determine to what extent

each trait was socially desirable for an adult in everyday conversation.

The social desirability scores of the language traits were analyzed by (1) determining which pole, if either, was socially desirable, and (2) comparing the overall scores for the female-linked characteristics with those of the male-linked characteristics. Traits were considered socially desirable if at least 60 percent of participants agreed which pole was desirable. An analysis of variance was used to compare scores of the female-linked language traits and male-linked language traits to determine whether or not there were differences in the degree of desirability assigned each group or by sex of subject.

Experiment 2 - Communication Competence

Ninety-six college students (47 females, 49 males) from three courses (economics, speech communication, and math) at Florida State University completed the questionnaire for the second experiment. None of the participants from Experiment 1 were included. Ages of participants, mostly white, ranged from 18 to 44 years with a mean of 22.1 years.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups according to the instrument received. General directions were given orally to each class, and all participants were asked to evaluate the same 36 characteristics on a 60-point bipolar scale as in Experiment 1. Thirty-three participants in treatment one (Competent Female) responded to the following written directions: "Imagine the language behavior of a mature, competent adult woman who communicates effectively. You are to examine the following language traits and indicate to what extent an adult woman who demonstrates communcation competence would exhibit each trait." For treatment two (Competent Male), which had 30 participants, adult man was substituted for adult woman in the directions. For treatment three (Competent Adult), with 33

participants, adult person was the cue used in the directions.

Results were analyzed using analysis of variance to detect (1) differences in total language scores among the three treatment groups; (2) differences in overall positiveness of characteristics for the three groups; and (3) differences among treatment groups for each language characteristic.

RESULTS

Experiment 1 - Social Desirability

First, the social desirability for each characteristic was computed by determining which pole was judged more socially desirable (see Table 2). For 24 characteristics over 70 percent of the subjects were in agreement while five more characteristics had at least 60 percent agreement. The remaining seven characteristics with fewer than 55 percent agreement were eliminated from consideration for social desirability (i.e., very emotional speech/not at all emotional speech; not at all authoritarian speech/very authoritarian speech; doesn't lounge, lean back while talking at all/lounges, leans back while talking a lot; not at all loud speech/very loud speech; not at all fast speech/very fast speech; not at all blunt speech/very blunt speech). Each characteristic was examined for differences in evaluations by sex of subject. For two traits, "talks a lot" (chi square = 10.81, df =1 $p < .001$), and "smiles a lot when talking" (chi square - 4.61, df = 1, $p < .032$), female subjects evaluated the traits significantly more desirable than did males. However, in both instances, the percentage of males judging the trait desirable also exceeded 50 percent. No other characteristics were evaluated significantly different by female and male subjects.

TABLE 2

SOCIALLY DESIRED LANGUAGE CHARACTERISTICS

FEMALE STEREOTYPIC LANGUAGE

Socially Desirable (Female Pole)	Not Socially Desirable (Male Pole)
Very smooth speech	Not at all smooth speech
Very wide range in rate and pitch	Not at all wide range in rate and pitch
Very open, self revealing speech	Not at all open, self revealing speech
Uses hands and face to express ideas a lot	Does not use hands and face to express ideas
Smiles a lot when talking	Doesn't smile a lot when talking
Very polite speech	Not polite speech at all
Very good grammar	Not at all good grammar
Enunciates clearly a lot	Doesn't enunciate clearly at all
Uses many details	Doesn't use many details
Very concerned for listener	Not at all concerned for listener
Very enthusiastic speech	Not at all enthusiastic speech
Very gentle speech	Not at all gentle speech
Very friendly speech	Not at all friendly speech
Talks a lot	Doesn't talk a lot at all
Does not use swear words at all	Uses swear words a lot
Not at all demanding voice	Very demanding voice
Not at all militant speech	Very militant speech
Not at all boastful	Very boastful speech
Not at all dominating speech	Very dominating speech
Conceals anger rather than showing it	Shows anger rather than concealing it

MALE STEREOTYPIC LANGUAGE

Socially Desirable (Male Pole)	Not Socially Desirable (Female Pole)
Very deep voice	Not at all deep voice
Very straight to the point	Not at all straight to the point
Sense of Humor in speech very much	Not at all sense of humor
Uses slang a lot	Does not use slang at all
Very forceful speech	Not at all forceful speech
Not at all high pitch	Very high pitch
Not at all jibberish	Very jibberish
Does not gossip at all	Gossips a lot
Doesn't talk about trivial topics at all	Talks about trivial topics a lot

Second, measures for female-linked versus male-linked socially desirable language characteristics were examined in two ways. First, it can be seen from Table 2 that a far greater number of female stereotypic language characteristics (20) are judged socially desirable than male stereotypic language characteristics (9) (chi square = 4.07, $df = 1$, $p < .05$).

Next, a language score was computed to determine whether or not the total evaluations of the characteristics were significantly at one pole or the other. With a mean of 43.26, the language score varied significantly from a neutral score of 40.0 ($t = 2.210$, $df = 93$, $p < .05$). This difference indicates that the female pole was viewed as more socially desirable than the male pole.

Finally, an analysis of variance was applied to the language scores to determine if differences by age, race, class or sex of subject were present. For one factor, sex of subject, there were significant differences with the language score of female subjects ($\bar{X} = 43.68$) significantly higher than the language score of male subjects ($\bar{X} = 42.40$) ($F = 6.698$, $df = 1$, $p < .011$). It should be noted that both scores fall in the stereotypically female pole for ratings of social desirability.

Experiment 2 - Communication Competence

Four types of results are reported here: (1) analysis of variance for differences in language scores among the three treatment groups; (2) analysis of variance for differences in overall degree of positiveness assigned to characteristics for three treatment groups; (3) analysis of variance for each characteristic in the three treatment groups; (4) and a comparison between the socially desired pole and the communication competence pole for each item.

First, an analysis of variance of the language scores produced significant differences among the three treatment groups ($F = 6.781$, $df = 2$, $p < .002$).

The competent adult group ($\bar{X}$ = 42.51) differed significantly from the competent male group ($\bar{X}$ = 41.38) (t = 1.951, df = 93, $p < .054$) while its difference from the competent female group ($\bar{X}$ = 43.54) did not reach a significance level (t = 1.862, df = 93, $p < .071$). The difference between the competent female and competent male groups was the greatest. (t = 3.733, df = 93, $p < .0001$). There were no differences according to sex of subject. It should be noted that scores for all groups indicate the social desirability of the female-linked characteristics. Thus, characteristics stereotypically linked with females were more closely linked with communication cometence for adult women and adults, sex unspecified, than with adult men. Similarly, characteristics stereotypically linked with adult males were less likely to be linked with communication competence for adult women or adults, sex unspecified.

When scores of each characteristic were recoded to reflect the social desirability poles from Experiment 1, an analysis of variance revealed no significant difference among the three treatment groups so the differences indicated above cannot be attributed to variations in overall positiveness ascribed to competent women, men, or adult speakers, but to variations between the male- and female-linked items.

An analysis of variance for each language characteristic showed that there were no significant differences for individual traits among the three treatment groups with three exceptions: deep voice (F = 8.136, df = 2, $p < .001$), high pitch (F = 10.589, df = 2, $p < .001$), and gentle speech (F = 7.569, df = 2, $p < .001$). There were no significant differences by sex of subject. Means for all treatment groups varied significantly for all three traits (see Table 3). Deep voice was evaluated as more evident for competent males and adults than for females although the female level of competence was at a neutral point (40.85). Similarly, high pitch was viewed

differently among the groups but not positive for competent speakers in any of the three groups. Finally, while gentle speech was rated as more desirable for competent females than males, the mean level for males was also near the neutral point (39.23).

TABLE 3

MEANS, t - TEST BETWEEN COMPETENT FEMALE, COMPETENT MALE AND COMPETENT ADULT GROUPS FOR THREE CHRACTERISTICS

	Deep Voice	High Pitch	Gentle Speech
		Means	
Competent Female (A)	40.85	38.85	48.06
Competent Adult (B)	36.61	34.09	43.70
Competent Male (C)	32.63	28.77	39.23
		t - TESTS	
A vs. B	2.176*	2.250*	2.019*
B vs. C	1.989*	2.457*	2.015*
A vs. C	4.112**	4.653**	3.986**

* $p < .05$
** $p < .001$

Finally, a comparison for each bi-polar characteristic between the direction of social desirability and communication competence was conducted by examining the percentage of respondents at each pole as in experiment one. For 27 of the characteristics for the competent adult apeaker, there was agreement

with the socially desired pole. Therefore, for only two was the direction of competence different: Does not use slang a lot (female-linked) was preferred over Uses slang a lot (male-linked) by 58% and Very demanding voice (male-linked) was preferred over Not at all demanding voice (female-linked) by 81% of respondents. At least 55% agreement was reached for four additional items which were not included on the socially desirable language characteristics (Table 2): Very emotional speech, Very loud speech, Very authoritarian speech, and Not at all agressive speech.

DISCUSSION

The findings from experiment one confirm that stereotypic characteristics, more often [redacted] assigned to women's language, are rated more socially desirable than those associated with men's language. While it is not surprising that female stereotypic traits such as concern for listener, open, self-revealing speech, and smiling were rated more desirable than male stereotypic traits such as demanding voice, boastful speech, and uses swear words a lot, the finding conflicts with the previous research in which traits associated with women's behavior are systematically devalued (Broverman et. al., 1970). However, Kramer's research (1978) on the characteristics of the ideal adult speaker support this finding. She suggested that the reason characteristics of women's language may be more positively rated was that ideal speech may be the most proper but not the most effective style of communication.

The findings from experiment two, which measured participants' ratings of competent speakers who communicate effectively, counter Kramer's explanation. Not only were stereotypic female characteristics rated more positively than stereotypic male characteristics for effective communcation among competent adults, but also the characteristics of competent females

were more like those for effective adults than were those for effective males. Although there are several possible explanations, this finding refutes the notion that male speech is superior (Lakoff, 1975) and has important implications for educators.

First, it is evident that many of the positive-valued traits are effective ones for affiliative interactions in which warmth, cooperation, and self-expression are valued. Participants may have been stressing competence in terms of the expressive, (social-emotional) situations which have been stereotypically linked with females rather than competence in task-oriented situations which have been stereotypically linked with males. However, without knowledge of what situations participants considered and without further studies about their perceptions in response to differing situations, there is no reason to assume that participants had a one-sided view. Nonetheless, an emphasis on social-emotional interactions could explain why the ratings for competent female speakers were significantly higher than those for competent males, but would not explain the competent adult ratings at the level of competent female speakers.

Second, it is possible that differences among three groups for ratings on specific characteristics may have skewed the results. However, there were only significant differences for three characteristics; deep voice, high pitch, and gentle speech, and analysis done omitting these characteristics did not change the results appreciably. Rather, one should note the remarkable similarity in the number of traits associated with effective communication for all three groups, woman, man and adult, sex unspecified. Even the ratings for three characteristics for which there were significant differences were in agreement on the direction of competent communication. While the preference for deep voice and not at all high pitch may appear

to handicap women because of biological differences, evidence of exaggerated speech pitch by both females and males in relationship to their anatomy suggest that women could naturally speak in lower tones.

A third explanation for the unexpected finding that language for competent female speakers is more similar than language for competent male speakers to competent speech for adults, sex unspecified, may stem from the use of respondents' perceptions of language, rather than examining the language itself.

As indicated in the introduction, research in conversational language differences between males and females has many gaps and problems to overcome to establish reliable results. It is possible that while the stereotypes of language indicate that many female-linked characteristics are more positively valued than male-linked characteristics for effective communication, in reality women and men speak very differently from these stereotypes. Such a possibility may explain the relative subordinate role of women in public and private domains where, for example, women may not talk a lot, conceal their anger rather than show it, or show concern for listener as the stereotypes indicate. Similarly, men may not exhibit the stereotypes attributed to them which were rated as less positive in this study, such as boastful speech, aggressive speech, and not very smooth speech, and be viewed as effective communicators. A number of studies have refuted the notion that women talk more than men, particularly in mixed-sex interactions (Eakins and Eakins, 1978). Considerably more research evidence would be necessary to confirm whether or not females and males actually differ in the 36 characteristics of the Language Stereotype Questionnaire.

Fourth, it may be possible that the stereotypic female characteristics are more positive and do contribute to more effective communication but

that other factors in the speech exchange system have more of an influence on outcomes than the characteristics measured here. For instance, if men in general are perceived to have higher positions of power and in many instances actually do have more power, then the social desirability or communication competence of women speakers may be beside the point. The outcome of a speech exchange, public or private, expressive or task-oriented, may derive more from the unequal power or perceptions of unequal power between women and men than the particulars of the exchange. Additionally, they may display power differences through their verbal and non-verbal behaviors which signal the degree to which power differential will effect a particular situation (Henley, 1977).

This explanation suggests a double standard for language behavior which applies to men and a double bind for women. That is, men may be effective at least in domains where power differentials are important without using the preferred language patterns for communcation competence and thus a double standard applies. Women who exhibit language behavior judged more effective may still be viewed as less effective than men because females are perceived as having less power and influence, and thus are placed in a double bind for communcation effectiveness.

Finally, the possibility remains that theorists and researchers have been too hasty in suggesting that differences in men's and women's language characteristics contribute to a separate "women's speech" which is inferior to "men's speech." Perhaps for too long the positive affiliative characteristics linked with female language have been devalued in a society more concerned with competition and individual achievement than with cooperative endeavors. This does not imply that communication competence must be an either/or proposition, either female language or male language, but effective communication can, for example, be both self-revealing and forceful,

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supportive and assertive. This study suggests that more attention needs to be given to the positive aspects of stereotypically female speech. Men could benefit from incorporating these positive characteristics into their communication patterns.

What implications does this study have for educators? It seems to me that we must challenge the double standard for male language and bring into the public consciousness the double bind that females face. Although more research is needed to determine at what ages perceptions of language patterns and actual language patterns differ between the sexes, educators need to be sensitive to possible differences in working with youth.

Until young people and adults are made more aware of the differences in stereotypic language and the impact of these differences, both males and females will be disadvantaged in developing their full communication competence.

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